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ABSTRACT

This study looked at the perceptions of their undergraduate educational experience and the future plans of students majoring in Studio Art at a state university. Using written questionnaires, interviews, participant observation at the site, and photos of art work done by participants, the study gathered information on career choices, perceptions of the job market, choice of courses, jobs held while in school, previous training, and advising and support. The 22 students questioned were all upper division Art students. The study identified themes which showed that participants chose a Studio Art major for avocational reasons, that many had past negative work experiences, that for career advice they did not seek advice beyond the Art Department and their peers, that most planned graduate work in order to teach art at the college level, and that most expected that their earnings after graduation would be very low. The study also found a lack of coordination with other parts of the institution and possible outside resources. (Contains 22 references.) (JB)

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Preparing for Poverty: A Case Study of College Art Students

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Abstract: This paper describes a qualitative case study about how undergraduate art students majoring in a Studio Art area perceive their undergraduate educational experiences and what connections they see between what they are doing in college and their plans for the future. Data were gathered through written questionnaires with open-ended questions completed by twenty-two students, in-depth interviews with six of the informants, and participant observation at the site. The majority of the art students estimated that their earnings after graduation will be an amount that is well below or near the "poverty level." They described their plans to support themselves with terms such as "menial jobs" and "anything that won't degrade myself."

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Preparing for Poverty: A Case Study of College Art Students

Introduction

Since 1970 a college degree has not been the guarantee to a good job that it once was. In fact, the numbers of college graduates entering the labor force now far exceed job openings, with many graduates experiencing either unemployment or under-employment in a job that did not require a college degree. One of the areas of college study hardest hit by this employment crisis has been the liberal arts. Although graduates in liberal arts may have better general educations than graduates with more technical training, many of them lack practical skills in finding appropriate jobs and applying their knowledge to the world of work (Rehnke et al, 1982-83). Many college students actually choose their major study area before choosing an occupation (Goodson, 1978) and may even delay choice of occupation until the senior year or even until after graduation (Strauss, 1970).

The difficulty of applying their liberal arts knowledge to the world of work may be especially true of Studio Art majors, who are not concretely preparing themselves for a job but spend much of their time in upper level college courses creating artwork. At a professional art college, interviews with students revealed that they did indeed intend to earn a living as artists, although their real goal in life was to produce "something of ultimate and permanent value" (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi, 1964). Nationally there are over 10,000 bachelor's degrees awarded each year in the area of this study. Although the number of students majoring in Fine Art may be rather small at each individual college or university, when viewed on the national level this population represents a sizable number of workers entering the labor force every year.

An important point emphasized by researchers conducting studies of art students and artists is that in the beginning professional artists must have some employment other than

their artwork in order to survive financially no matter how much they would prefer to work solely at their art. They often hold a series of low level, unskilled jobs in order to earn a living. (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi ,1976; Hendricks, pg. 69; Reuter, 1974). A survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics showed that one year after graduation from twenty different areas surveyed (including Nursing, Math, Agriculture, History, etc.), the graduates in Art were least likely to be holding a professional position (Hecker, 1982).

While most graduating college students are faced with the choice between two options: seeking employment or seeking admittance to a graduate or professional school (Bachhuber, 1977), Studio Art students are generally faced with choosing from three options: seeking a job, seeking admittance to a graduate or professional school, and seeking to become a practicing, professional fine artist. And in reality, they often must do two, and sometimes all three, as they attempt to become a professional artist; continue higher studies in art; and seek a "survival " or "day" job to support themselves. Therefore, the career development process may be more complex for Studio Art students than for students in many other majors.

Although the career development tasks of college Fine Art students can be very complex, apparently very little research has been done in this area. This scarcity of research may have been partly due to the previous tendency to think that the occupational world of artists was not comparable to other fields. One study done of the career patterns of successful painters found that "the nature of artistic careers or the factors that impinge upon them" are essentially the same as careers found in other fields (Hendricks, pg. 83).

Historical Context of the Study

In the past, most practicing artists were educated at the professional schools of art. Although Fine Art departments had begun to appear in American colleges by the middle of the eighteenth century, growth was rather slow for the first century. But after World War II,

the growth of college-based studio art programs was phenomenal, both in numbers and in academic importance (Morrison, 1973; Ritchie et al, 1966). Growing social and economic pressure for young people to get a college degree made it increasingly difficult for art schools without a college affiliation to attract students (Adler, 1979). So it is generally recognized that the typical artist today has been educated in a university (Rosenberg, 1973), and state colleges and universities are definitely an important force in the training of professional artists.

Related Research

Except for a few rare studies (Whitesel, 1977; Adams and Kowalski, 1980), most of the sparse research about Art students has been conducted with students at professional schools of art (Strauss, 1970; Griff, 1970; Barron, 1972; Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi, 1964). It is interesting to note that while the independent schools of art, such as the Art Institute of Chicago, were the sites for most of the earlier research studies, they are now also the sites for most of the art career development programs (Geahigan, 1981).

One researcher who has been active in art career research was Lita Whitesel who did a doctoral dissertation on "Career commitments of women art students" (Whitesel, 1974). Although this was a quantitative study, the researcher did seek some information through open-ended type questions on the instrument and then generated categories form the responses received. Whitesel also conducted a study comparing the self-perceived personalities of women graduate studio art students with those of women students in medicine and psychology (1979).

Another related study conducted at a university was about professional self-identification among art students. With eleven null hypothesis, this study was a heavily quantified effort "to determine what kinds of factors affect the aspiring art students' self-identity" (Adams and Kowalski, 1980).

Since qualitative research is especially appropriate for obtaining the "insider perspective," qualitative studies should contribute more to understanding the undergraduate experiences and personal career attitudes of art students than quantitative studies can contribute. In 1987, Studies in Art Education published a taxonomy of styles of on-site descriptive (qualitative) research in Art Education. Of the thirty-one on-site descriptive studies, only a few of the appear to have been conducted in a college or university setting. And it appears that none of those were related to the area of Fine Art career development (Ettinger, 1987).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive case study was to answer two general research questions: 1. How do undergraduate students majoring in Studio Art perceive their educational experiences at a state university? 2. What connections, if any, do these students see between their educational experiences and their expectations for the future?

Information was sought about important factors relating to their undergraduate experience including career choices and perceptions of jobs available, choice of art and non-art elective courses, jobs held during undergraduate preparation, previous training in another fields, and advising and support as provided in various ways.

Method

The population for the study was all Studio Art students (majoring in Painting, Drawing, Watercolor, Printmaking, Ceramics, Sculpture, and Inter-Areas) who had passed a Portfolio Review in order to enroll in upper division Art courses at that time. Because of constant transition in the population and incomplete records supplied by the department, it was not possible for me to determine the exact number of students in the total population at that time.

Data were gathered through written questionnaires, interviews, participant observation at the site, and photos of artwork done by the informants. To begin the study, I did some

participant observation at the site to be able to describe it and to understand locations, factors or events that were important in the undergraduate experiences of these students. Survey questionnaires were given to as many of the population as could be located during Spring 1991. Twenty-two of those students filled out the surveys and returned them. The questionnaires gathered information on demographics, as well as about their college life, economics, artwork, and plans for the future, as well as being a way of making contact with the students.

From among the students who had completed questionnaires, I chose to interview six informants. Each semi-structured interview lasted about one hour and was conducted in a location convenient for the student such as their studio, the Art Building lobby, and the downtown student Art Gallery during an exhibit. The interviews were conducted during Spring Semester 1991 and Summer Semester 1992. Each interview was audio-taped and I carefully transcribed the tapes for analysis. In addition to individual themes, those data were analyzed across the interviews into categories, describing such aspects as their relationships with professors, the importance of their artwork, and their expectations for the future. Of course, there are many possible levels of qualitative data analysis, and at the time of this writing, deeper analysis of the data continues.

The Informants

At the time they completed the questionnaires in April, 1991, the age range among the twenty-two informants was from 20 years to 38 years old, with most of the students being between 20 and 23 years old. There were sixteen females and six males. Eighteen were single and four of the females were married.

Expected graduation dates ranged from 1991 to 1994, with most expecting to graduate some time in 1992. All of the informants were working on a Bachelor of Fine Art (B.F.A.) degree. There were eighteen majoring solely in Art with four doing a double major in Art and Art Education (in the College of Education.) For Area of Concentration in Art, there were six

in Ceramics, five in Painting, three in Drawing, with the rest in Printmaking, Watercolor, and combinations of areas. For reasons unknown, no surveys were completed by students majoring in Sculpture, although there were several Sculpture majors in the population. Therefore, this study is not about the experiences of Sculpture majors.

Most of the informants were working part-time while attending college and most of them had several sources of financial support. Thirteen of them were receiving financial support from their parents, while four listed parents as their sole means of support.

Observations

Participant observation at the site revealed that places that were important to the informants included various parts of the Art Building such as the classrooms, the studios, the University Art Gallery, and the bulletin boards. In addition, the student Art Gallery at a downtown location a couple of miles away was extremely important to this population. The Art Department pays the gallery rent, and students who sign up to have exhibits there are solely responsible for hanging, opening, and maintaining their exhibits. Events that were important included individual Portfolio reviews, class group artwork critiques, art show "Openings" (receptions), the annual student art competition, and the annual "honors" competition for Art seniors.

Snapshots that I took of artworks by the informants which were included in various exhibits such as the annual Student Art Competitions, the B.F.A. Honors Exhibit, or individual art exhibits revealed that most of the students worked in styles more modern than traditional. At the time they completed the survey in April, 1991, most of the students had sold very little artwork; seventeen of them had sold $500 or less. And in fact, much of the artwork created by this population will probably appeal only to a rather elite audience.

Although ceramic artworks were judged on utilitarian and aesthetic aspects, in the two-dimensional areas of concentration, emphasis seemed to be on creativity, message, in-

dividual style, or experimentation rather than on visual representation or attractiveness. Some of the work was "non-objective" with no representation of recognizable images. Others used representation arbitrarily to convey a message. One informant included images reminiscent of old book illustrations. It was interesting that two of the informants were producing small xeroxed books of their artwork to give out to people, in order to share their art.

Major Themes

Although the final levels of data analysis have not been completed at this time, certain themes have appeared in the data. From the interviews, it seems that the informants' reasons for choosing to major in Studio Art were more avocational than vocational. They decided to major in Art because it was something they enjoyed doing. "It was something I've wanted to do all my life." "I've always been interested in Art . . . and I wanted to do something that I would enjoy."

The informants described many of their past job experiences as negative ones, thus narrowing rather than broadening their job options. Although most of them felt capable of finding jobs, generally the ones that they were able to find were rather low level jobs that they really did not want to work at long-term. To the informants, "work" means their artwork. When I asked one student "what kind of work he was doing" (meaning work for pay) he thought I was asking about his current artwork.

For career advice, these students talked mainly to other art people: art professors, other art students, or former graduates of the Art Department. Although ten of them said they would like help writing a resume, none of them had ever gone to talk to advisors in the office of Career Planning and Placement, where there are workshops, handouts, and a critiquing service available to help university students write their resumes.

Most of the students were planning to go to graduate school and complete a Master of Fine Arts degree in order to teach at the college level. It seems that teaching may be a career

that is desirable more for its compatibility with their aspirations in art than for its own worth. "And now – I want to teach. But if I could just paint, that's what I'd do . . . in a heartbeat."

The rule in this Art Department is not to admit its own graduates into the M.F.A. in Studio Art program, which has limited spaces available. Therefore, any student planning to do graduate studies in Studio Art will have to move some distance away. One informant found herself in a real quandary about what do to when she was rejected by all the graduate schools where she had applied for the following semester. She also expressed hesitation about investing in three more years of college without any guarantee of finding a teaching position since there were so many applicants for any art jobs available in higher education.

When the art students were asked to estimate the amounts of their costs of living and their income for the first few years after graduation, the majority of them estimated that their earnings after graduation will be below or near the current "poverty level." And almost half of the twenty-two thought that their costs of living will exceed their income. They described their plans to support themselves with terms such as "menial jobs" and "anything that won't degrade myself." When asked about any connections seen between the rigorous five years working on the college degree and any plans for the future, one student responded, "School helps instill the work ethic and being a student helps prepare for poverty."

Discussion

There appears to be a need for more research done on the career attitudes and the career development needs of Fine Art students at American state universities. Although there appears to be a growing interest in conducting qualitative research in college art settings, apparently these methods have not yet been used for research in the area of art career development, and there have been only a few related quantitative studies. If there is any other ongoing similar or related research, I would really like to hear from the researchers.

During this research, I have gotten the impression that parts of our university career advising system do not work very well together. It appears that faculty advisors in the Art Department do not send their advisees for outside help. And professionals in career advising apparently are using the usual forms of marketing without considering whether or not the information will reach the targeted audience. In this case, there were many Studio Art students wishing for career advice in the Art Building while two blocks away in the Career Planning and Placement office there were handouts on resume writing, job hunting, and a special one entitled "What You Can Do With a Degree in Art."

Unfortunately many educators in liberal arts still hold the traditional belief that whether or not graduates are able to obtain appropriate employment is not their concern. While conducting this research, I was told that it was not the concern of this Art Department whether their graduates could make a living or not – the Department's only obligation was to make them into artists good enough to make it artistically in New York if they wanted to move there.

But there is some evidence that many practicing artists, especially in New York, need assistance with business skills necessary to actually get paid for being an artist (Caplin, 1983). Since the typical American artist of today is educated at a state university or college, college seems a logical place for them to acquire such business skills. Also good skills in job-hunting would help them make use of the bachelor's degree they have worked to complete.

In the broadest sense of the term, career development represents the preparation for effective and satisfying living, not simply preparation for work" (Harren et al, 1981). Thus, every human being has a career, whether that career is planned, effective, and satisfying, or just haphazard and unhappy. And conversely, liberal preparation for life could also include preparation for satisfying work instead of a life of poverty.

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